

KATHLEEN CECIL • CATE 2011 DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD WINNER

Kathleen was born in Norfolk, Virginia, to Joseph and Mary Cecil. She has two younger sisters and one younger brother. The family lived in many places during the early years of her life including Guam, Washington State, and San Diego because her father was in the U. S. Navy. She attended St. Mary's College in Indiana where she met Tom. After they married, they moved to San Francisco and had two sons, Devin and Blair.

She worked as a substitute teacher for a time and then began teaching at Mercy High School in San Francisco. She moved to Mission High School because she felt that the students there needed her more. She taught at Mission for the last twelve years—always with zeal, concern and a sense of mission.

Passionate is a word that many who know her—family, colleagues and students—associate with Kathleen. At a time when districts were offering a bonus to teachers to entice them to teach in inner-city schools, Kathleen taught there by choice. She felt that her students did not get a fair deal in many ways. She worked tirelessly to help them, forcing them to succeed even when they thought they didn't want to or couldn't. Her support varied from making banana bread for them to practicing "tough love," showing them that making school easy for them was selling them short. She knew that they could learn and succeed even if they thought it wasn't possible. Equity and access was important to Kathleen and she felt it was often missing at all levels of education.

Junior Alvin Blanco-Ramirez said about his teacher, "In ninth grade, I was a bad slacker. She kept pushing me to do my work. If she wasn't there for me through all these years, I'd probably still be in ninth grade right now." Brianna Frank, also in 11th grade, echoed the sentiment. She described being upset with herself for her initial reaction to Kathleen. "I couldn't believe I was mad at a teacher who tried to help me with all her might — and I mean all of it."

To achieve the goals she set for her students and for education in general, Kathleen took a passionate interest in political action. She was an executive board member of the United Educators of San Francisco, and belonged to a peer-support group called Teachers 4 Social Justice. Kathleen worked tirelessly to make change a reality. She actively served on the Curriculum Study Commission, was on the board of the Central California Council Teachers of English as Policy Chair and was Resolutions Chair (political action) for CATE. Last year she served on the same committee at the national level—the NCTE Resolutions Committee—and was appointed chair of that committee for this year. Kathleen motivated those around her to take action, not just to criticize or complain but to do. On the CATE Board she served as our conscience and moral compass; she asked the tough questions and reminded us of the fate of students who were on the fringe—poor, displaced, speaking English as a second language and experiencing failure at every level.

This August Kathleen passed away after suffering a brain aneurism on the first day of school during her third-period English class. Mission High School students say their teacher was known for her biting sarcasm, brutal honesty, and dedication to her students. A part of a high school hallway was decorated with personal notes about her, including some of their favorite "Cecilisms," such as "It's OK, you can turn in your work next year."

Although Kathleen was passionate about teaching and about her students, her greatest passion was reserved for her family. She traveled extensively with her sons giving her time, energy and love to each of them individually. She and her artist son, Devin, visited the museums and galleries of Europe. With her adventurous son, Blair, she explored Asia and Egypt. What wonderful memories they will all cherish. Kathleen will be remembered by those who loved and admired her for her passion, dedication, energy and concern, and maybe above all her quick and sometimes biting humor. Her legacy will live on through her family, students, the new teachers she mentored, and her colleagues. She was a true friend and will be missed but not forgotten.



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Faye Louise Grindstaff
- 1991
James E. Day
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Nancy McHugh
- 1993
Ken Lane
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George Nemetz
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Pat Cipriano
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Don Mayfield
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Leni Cook
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Dianne Lucas
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